

St James's Church Piccadilly London

4 September 2016 Trinity 15/International Day of the Disappeared
Readings Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33
The Revd Lindsay Meader

hard words for hard times

Yes, you heard right. Those words bear repeating, because we cannot simply hear them and move on. We cannot gloss over them and let them go.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

Really, Jesus? Really?! These words attributed to Christ in this morning's Gospel are very hard to swallow. Charles Cousar writes of today's Gospel passage: *"While there are texts to comfort the disturbed, this one disturbs the comfortable."*¹

In a climate in which we have recently seen a disturbing rise in hate speech and hate crime, to hear such words from the mouth of the one who came to extend God's love to all humankind, is shocking and hard to comprehend. They seem and sound nonsensical. Are we really expected to believe that Jesus insisted that if we are to follow him we should hate our nearest and dearest? In short, no. Surely not. It's a proposition that goes against everything we believe about God and Christ, and about God in Christ. We will come back to these words later, to consider what sense we can make of them in today's world. But for now, let us acknowledge that they are indeed hard words for hard times.

This week saw the first anniversary of the publication of the picture that brought the ongoing refugee crisis into sharp and shocking focus – the photograph of the body of three year old Syrian, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach, which was seen by 20

million people worldwide. It was widely hoped that this tragic image would prove to be a turning point. Yet, twelve months on in the relatively calm waters the Italian coastguard have just faced one of the busiest weeks of the year, in which in just three days they've taken part in 70 rescue missions off the Libyan coast, saving up to 10,000 refugees. In the same news report there were two tiny newborn babies, twins who had successfully survived the voyage to sanctuary - and further uncertainty. Who knows how their lives will pan out? At least now, thank God, they have a chance at life. The authorities estimate that at least 3,000 people have perished in attempted sea crossings so far this year. Most will remain unidentified to the anguish of their loved ones.

For many of us, the imprint of Arabella Dorman's installation *Flight* the inflatable rubber dinghy and three lifejackets salvaged from the Greek island of Lesvos, which were suspended upside down from our roof during last Christmas and Epiphany is still present and palpable. As part of the installation, we remember too, the other 59 lifejackets, still encrusted with sand and seaweed which surrounded our nativity figures, each one bearing witness to one of the men, women or children who we know were rescued from the stricken boat and made it to safety. The lifejackets were a silent testimony to voices we may never hear, whose names and stories we may never know. They are survivors with whom we are now inextricably linked, but yet, in many ways, for us they are missing, unidentified, disappeared. We remember

¹ Cousar, Charles *in Common Worship Lectionary: A Scripture Commentary Year C*, Houlsden, Leslie & Rogerson, John eds. SPCK: London, 2003, p.232

and pray for them, but they were then, and still are for us, enigmas.

Today, as in partnership with the British Red Cross Family Tracing Service, we mark the International Day of the Disappeared, we are challenged by another art installation, by our own Anna Sikorska. As Lucy has already highlighted, in the east window behind me, the figure of Christ is missing from the cross and hangs today in blackout. It is at once both subtle and powerful; silent and yet eloquent.

Like our Gospel reading and like the humanitarian crisis in which we are engulfed, albeit at one stage removed, this enigmatic installation places a deep challenge at the heart of our faith and our lives. What are our priorities? What are the values by which we live our lives and navigate our world? Who and what would we find it hardest to live without?

For most of us, contrary to those difficult words from today's Gospel, our priorities are frequently those we love and who love us; often, but not always, our immediate family. We can barely comprehend the fear that leads parents to board overcrowded barely sea-worthy rubber boats bearing tiny babies and young infants, but we understand that they do so because of love; they do so because they want these precious young ones to have the chance of a future, and because they believe the only chance to save the lives of their children and themselves, is to risk losing them.

But of course, it's people of all ages who become the disappeared, who are today missing through conflict, migration and disaster. Today we reflect upon the pain of the ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is not just confined to conflict, think of those bereaved in 9/11 or through the devastating

Boxing Day tsunami, who may never be given closure or the parents of Madeleine McCann, who live with the agony of not knowing.

When it comes to conflict and migration, it's a pain that works both ways: when a family member has fled, those left behind have no idea whether they will ever return and that individual who has left may find it very difficult to get messages back home, especially if it doing so will put their loved ones at risk. This is where the expertise of the International Red Cross (and Red Crescent) comes into play, and the vital Family Tracing Service who will spend years on the trail of reuniting loved ones and providing much needed closure.

Today the challenge is not just to recognise the problem and its vast scale, but to consider ways in which we can respond. The challenge is not just in the crisis but also in our Gospel reading. In Matthew, the writer has sought to soften these harsh words from Luke, instead Jesus says: *"Whoever loves father or mother more than me . . . and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."* In seeking to tone down these words of Christ, some commentators have described how in the Semitic vernacular it was common to pair two opposites to state a preference. In other words saying "I love the city and hate the village would not mean that you felt any animosity towards the village but rather that you preferred the city. Perhaps more helpful is Albert Nolan's interpretation: *"Because of the paucity of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, the word 'hate' is used to cover all the attitudes which are not love. Thus it could mean ... being indifferent to, detached from, or not preferring, someone."*²

But if we are to better understand these hard words of Jesus we must consider them in the light of the rest of his teachings, and his life

² Nolan, Albert in *Resources for Worship & Preaching Year C*, Ward, Hannah & Wilde, Jennifer eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003, p.240

and ministry. Certainly there are other occasions when it seems that family is not top of his list of priorities. When he is teaching and some of the disciples come to tell him his mother, brothers and sisters are seeking him he virtually disowns them, pointing to his audience and replying that *“whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* (Matthew 12:50)

I read into these sayings of Jesus the intent not to denigrate, but rather to expand the family; rather than exclude, to include and draw all into the family of God, regardless of biological ties. This is about justice and equality.

But there’s although an important warning about the costs and demands of discipleship. Jesus is clear that it’s not an easy path, but one that will demand much of us. He was addressing a large crowd, many of whom had showed up out of curiosity and Jesus wanted to make sure they were quite clear what he was about and just how much he would expect from those who chose to follow him.

It is not a decision to be taken lightly, which he goes on to explain in his remarks about how the importance of being prepared, of how a builder would not undertake to construct a tower without first planning the materials and cost and labour; and of how a king would not go into battle if he had insufficient troops.

For some weeks now, members of St James’s have been considering how best we can respond to the refugee crisis. *Flight* was a powerful tool in raising awareness of the problem but like many churches, we realise that practical help is urgently needed and as vital as prayer. We need to plan and be prepared, so we have the infrastructure, resources and the volunteers in place to ensure that our endeavours are successful, but together we can make a difference.

If you’d like to find out more, please do come to our Creative Spirit service at six o’clock tonight. We’ll be exploring this call more deeply, looking at ways to support the work of the Red Cross Family Tracing Service and also ways to offer welcome and hospitality to refugees and family members arriving in England to join relatives who have been granted asylum. Please do join us as we learn more about Anna’s window installation, hear more from Andrea and the Red Cross team and watch a short film about welcome made by young refugees. We’ll also be outlining some of the projects in the pipeline at St James’s and commissioning those who are interested in getting involved.

Twice in the last week, I’ve watched Alrowwad Youth Theatre from Aida refugee camp in Palestine perform here in the UK - at Greenbelt on Monday and here in London last night. A number of us from St James’s visited the camp on our pilgrimage to the Holy Land three years ago. Their principle of Beautiful Resistance made a deep and lasting impression on us. The founder of Alrowwad, Abdulfattah A Abusrour (whose names means “father of happiness”) spoke movingly at both Greenbelt and last night about the challenges they face in pursuing liberation, justice and peace in the face of occupation. Abdulfattah makes it very clear that they don’t have what he calls the “luxury of despair” but rather that they must focus on the positives, and on encouraging the young people to express themselves through the culture of ‘Beautiful Resistance’ – they must celebrate life through theatre, art, dance, photography and film. He is insistent that giving up is never an option or an answer. *“We cannot wait for miracles, but rather we must provoke miracles”*. They are seeking not pity but partners.

Similarly, here in the UK, and here in London, there are now many refugees longing to find news of the families they have left behind, or loved ones with whom they have lost touch. Like our Palestinians friends, they need not

our pity, but our help. Do we have the faith,
the will and the resources to say yes?

Let us pray:

Sheltering God,

You were born in flight, your parents anxious
and given no rest.

The manner of your birth calls us to
open-heartedness and sensitivity to the
strangers in our midst.

Help us not to flee your challenge.

Grace us this day as we seek

to see you in the faces of those uprooted,
separated from loved ones,
and weary, as they seek refuge and peace.

Amen.

Lindsay Meader